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PHILOSOPHASTER ONCE MORE

BY ANDREW F. WEST

In the last issue of *Classical Philology* (p. 436) Professor Tenney Frank proposes to amend *vir gravis et philosophaster Tullius*, the grimly playful opening of the twenty-seventh chapter in the Second Book of Augustine's *De civitate dei* (Dombart's text), by changing *philosophaster Tullius* to *philosophus M. Tullius*. To justify this he offers three mutually supporting reasons, as follows: "What awakens suspicion against the passage is, firstly, that the word *philosophaster* has a tone of scorn that ill accords with *gravis* which precedes; secondly, that the abusive term is directed against Cicero for whom Augustine usually shows deep regard. To be sure he often disagrees with Cicero, but he seldom applies disrespectful epithets to him." The third reason is purely paleographical: "I would suggest the reading *Vir gravis et philosophus M. Tullius*. The uncial M was probably mistaken for the numeral III, which was then read adverbially *ter*. As a matter of fact Dombart's reading is supported only by a correction of C. The MSS give *philosophus tertullius*, which preserves the second stage of the corruption."

Nevertheless, and with every concession to the brightness of Professor Frank's emendation, the evidence stands decisively in favor of *philosophaster Tullius*, both as appropriate to Augustine's literary habit and also as the evidently true text. Let us consider Professor Frank's three reasons.

1. *Philosophaster* "ill accords with *gravis*" on the two assumptions, but only on the two assumptions that *vir gravis* is used in the passage with the deference of real compliment instead of with a touch of ironical humor, and that the general tone of the passage it introduces is not ironical. But the tone of the entire chapter is keenly ironical. Chapter 27 is one of those brief digressions to which Augustine is so prone. He is always ready to run into an open switch. So it is here. He goes aside a moment to take a quick glance at what seems to him the reprehensible and amusing incongruity between the per-

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sonally upright *vir gravis*, “vaunted philosopher [or philosopher], too”—*et philosophaster* or *et philosophus*, as you like it—and his political relation, first as aedile and then as consul, to the legalized immoralities of Roman religion. Here is the passage:

Vir gravis et philosophaster [or philosophus M.?] Tullius aedilis futurus clamat in auribus civitatis inter cetera sui magistratus officia sibi Floram matrem ludorum celebritate placandam; qui ludi tanto devotius, quanto turpius celebrari solent. Dicit alio loco iam consul in extremis periculis civitatis, et ludos per decem dies factos, neque ullam rem quae ad placandos deos pertineret praetermissam; quasi non satius erat tales deos irritare temperantia quam placare luxuria, et eos honestate etiam ad inimicitias provocare quam tanta deformitate lenire.

Here the part about Cicero ends, but the rest of the chapter runs on in the same caustic tone, with some fiery rhetoric added at the end. *Solvitur legendo.* Even if *philosophaster* be out of tune with *gravis*, it is in perfect tune with everything else, for the pathetically inconsistent figure Cicero cuts is the one *point d'appui* of the entire passage. If, however, *vir gravis* itself (for this fixed locution should not be split) becomes a shade humorous here—as is indeed necessary, quite apart from *philosophaster*, in case *vir gravis* is to be in accord with the tone of the passage—then not only do we find everything in tune, but we also get one of those bits of surprising climax in irony which now and then flare in Augustine’s writing. *Vir gravis*, “one of our best citizens,” standing alone and at the start, is sufficiently and uninterestingly serious. Add *et philosophaster*, “vaunted philosopher, too”—and the *vir gravis* looks uneasy. Who is he? *Tullius!*—and now things are getting interesting, for Augustine is starting in to play a little.

2. We need not be worried by the hypothesis that Augustine would not be likely to apply an “abusive term” or “disrespectful epithet” to Cicero. Is *philosophaster* such an epithet, and, if so, in what degree? Let us see. Outside this instance, the word seems to occur only twice in extant ancient Latin, and both of these times in Augustine’s *Contra Iulianum* (op. imperf. v. 11, and vi. 18). Here are the two instances:

Proh Dei atque hominum pudorem! Haecine tam manifesta et ante oculos constituta ab homine non videri, qui valde acutus et eruditus et

philosophaster et dialecticus vult videri (v. 11)—“not seen even by a man who would like to be thought acute, learned, a philosopher of some pretension, and a logician.”

unde etiam Mantuanus poeta naturalium gnarior quam philosophaster Poenorum (vi. 18)—“Virgil the poet has more sense in judging physical questions than the vaunted philosopher of Carthage has.”

Philosophaster, then, must not be judged an “abusive term” nor even a “disrespectful epithet” in the ordinary sense. It is a word of curtailed appreciation at best and of disparagement at worst. “Over-rated,” whether by oneself or others, is the root of the implication, but it does not amount to anything like the full-blown suggestion of worthlessness we convey by our word “poetaster.”

After all, it is not a question of personal affront, but of literary polemics. Luther did not mean an insult to the long-dead Aristotle, when in fiery ardor against his philosophy he wrote him down a “verdammt Heide.” Augustine’s wit here is not raw and rough like Luther’s, but has a touch of rather cheerful amusement. No doubt his references to Cicero are usually in the handsome manner. Yet his admiration, though ardent and genuine, was seriously qualified. It was Cicero the unsurpassed orator, stylist and student he admired. He had less regard for him as philosopher and least as statesman. Cicero’s personality was not heroic to him. Even in the famous passage (*Conf.* iii. 4. 7) where he tells how in his youth the *Hortensius* inflamed his soul to seek better things, he writes with reserve: “librum quemdam Ciceronis cuius linguam fere omnes mirantur, pectus non ita.”

Moreover, we need not go outside the *De civitate dei* to find occasional disparagement of Cicero both as statesman and philosopher. In iii. 30 Augustine pictures him as *usque adeo caecus et improvidus futurorum* in his lack of sense to discern the bearing of the threatening political conditions of his time. In iv. 30 he dubs him *iste Academicus* and exposes his philosophical inconsistency and lack of courage to stand to his guns: “nec quod in hac disputatione disertus insonat muttire auderet in populi contione.” Again in v. 9 he raps him for his philosophical evasion, with the added dig that he was hardly acting either bravely or ingenuously.

And Cicero was not his only mark. He even took a shot now and

then at Varro, his *vir undecunque doctissimus*, whose vast and honest learning he admired, almost with awe. Take this well-known hit in vi. 6: "O Marce Varro, cum sis homo omnium doctissimus et sine ulla dubitatione acutissimus, sed tamen homo, non deus." Lastly, on this point, it will not do to forget that in the earlier part of the *De civitate dei*, more fully than elsewhere in his writings, he uses irony, both veiled and open, with great freedom. He is composing the elaborate epitaph of Roman paganism. The Roman deities gave him many chances. So did Aeneas, *pius totiens appellatus* (i. 3). So did certain figures in Roman history—especially when related to Roman religion. A full and superb instance of his veiled irony occurs in xix. 1-3, and with the *homo doctissimus* as victim.

3. After all, the main question is still unanswered. It is not whether the word *philosophaster* "ill accords with gravis" or whether Augustine would use "disrespectful epithets" of Cicero, but whether we may believe *philosophaster* is what Augustine wrote. This is purely a question of fact which cannot be settled without resort to the MSS.

Now Professor Frank's paleographical point is that *philosophaster* "is supported only by a correction of C" and that all the other MSS are against it. C is the codex Corbeiensis of Dombart, easily the best MS he used (see Dombart's *Praefatio*, v). Of what the reading is a MS "correction" is not to me quite clear. Probably, however, of *philosophus tertullius*, the admittedly impossible reading of all Dombart's other MSS. Yet, even with the discussion thus far confined to the area of the MSS known to Dombart, we still have in C¹ the best single witness (even with the scribe's correction) ranging itself in favor of *philosophaster*, and all the others giving an impossible reading that must be amended. Now to assume, on this slight basis, that the *ter* in *tertullius* is III "read adverbially" and then to assume that this III came by miscopying an assumed original uncial M and that this was followed without variation in all the known copies, except in the case of C, is to assume a good deal. It seems to me much more in keeping with what we know of mediaeval scribes to assume that they altered the unfamiliar and puzzling *philosophaster* merely by changing one vowel to another, *a* to *u*, to make the text more intelligible.

Yet even if *philosophus M. Tullius* be given a chance to stand together for inspection as a tentative emendation, it needs to be propped still more by showing that *M. Tullius* accords with Augustine's way of writing Cicero's name. I cannot pretend to have read every mention of Cicero's name in Augustine's writings. But I have gone carefully through the *De civitate dei* on this dreary errand and find that Cicero is named 62 times in all, usually as plain *Cicero*, just as is Augustine's habit with other familiar Roman names, such as *Varro* and *Vergilius*. Plain *Cicero* occurs 48 times, *Marcus Tullius Cicero* (iii. 27) once (in a rhetorical amplification), *Tullius* 12 times, *verbis Tullianis* once (iii. 27), and *M. Tullius* (or *Marcus Tullius*) not at all. The twelve instances of *Tullius* are as follows:

Tullius loquens, ii. 21
philosophaster Tullius, ii. 27
non elegit locum Tullius, iii. 31
ait Tullius, iv. 26
Tullius ubi loquitur, v. 13
Tullius in libris, vi. 12
ait Tullius, ix. 5
ait Tullius, xix. 5
scribit Tullius, xxi. 11
Tullius admiratur, xxii. 6
ait Tullius, xxii. 22
de re publica Tullius, xxii. 28.

All these, except iii. 31, are used to quote or refer to Cicero's writings. *Cicero* in the *De civitate dei* is used for Cicero in any phase, *Tullius* (with the one exception noted) for Tully the philosopher or orator—very much as in old-fashioned English literary use. At any rate *M. Tullius* has no sanction from Augustine's usage in the *De civitate dei* and *Tullius* suits it precisely.

Fortunately Dombart's fairly excellent edition has been superseded by a better one. The text of the *De civitate dei* has had only three recensions that need be named here. The first is the Paris text of Dübner in 1838 and the second the Leipzig text of Dombart in 1863 and 1877. Then, latest and best—an *édition définitive* for many moons to come—we have the Vienna text of Hoffmann in 1899. His text is made not only on the basis of a complete and rigorous determination at first hand (a labor neither Dübner nor Dombart

was permitted to accomplish), but rests on more good MSS than were even used before by any modern editor.

Vir gravis et philosophaster Tullius is Hoffmann's text, just as it was Dombart's. On what does *philosophaster* rest? On the testimony of C¹, already referred to, and on much more. The three primary witnesses to the passage in which *philosophaster* lies are L, C, and *p*. L is the Lyons codex, a semiuncial of the sixth century, the oldest and best copy of that part of the text it preserves. C is the codex Corbeiensis already mentioned, a semiuncial of the seventh century, and *p* is an unusually good late MS in Paris. Now L, C¹, and *p* give the reading *philosophaster tullius*. So does A, a fairly high-class ninth-century MS closely related to L. C² and *p*² together with all the inferior MSS give the impossible *philosophus tertullius*. Thus the paleographical evidence is decisive, and only purely subjective reasons remain for suspecting this strange-looking *philosophaster*, oddly conspicuous in a company of words otherwise commonplace and familiar.

The fact that it appears only once in the *De civitate dei* and apparently only twice more in Augustine, and in Augustine only, proves nothing either against its existence or against its use elsewhere. Other Latin writers may have used it sparingly. It survives in English here and there. Henry More, the Cambridge Platonist, used it. Other survivors of its species in English are the well-known and serviceable "poetaster," with "criticaster" in Swinburne, "politicaster" in L'Estrange, and that *rara avis* "grammaticaster," perched lonely among the vocables of Ben Jonson.

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